

Sharp Rise Reported in Multiple Prescriptions

Study Attributes Increase to Growing Number of Seniors, Aggressive Marketing by Drug Companies

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Americans who visited a doctor's office in 1999 were far more likely to receive more than one drug than U.S. patients were in 1985, a new government survey of physicians shows. The increasing reliance on prescription medicines spanned all ages of patients and almost all classes of drugs, with the notable exception of antibiotics.

About 66 percent of visits to doctors in 1999 resulted in patients receiving a medicine or a vaccine, compared with 61 percent in 1985. But those given prescriptions -- especially the elderly -- were much more likely to get multiple drugs, said Catharine W. Burt, chief of the ambulatory care statistics branch at the National Center for Health Statistics, which conducted the survey.

The increase in prescribing "is just a lot more than we would have expected just from the aging of the population," Burt said.

More and better medicines are on the market now than in 1985, experts said. New guidelines also have led doctors to treat many conditions -- such as high blood pressure, diabetes and asthma -- more aggressively, often by using more than one drug.

But the survey's findings also suggest that drug advertising -- including the promotion of drugs directly to the public -- may be contributing to the trend.

"The ones that are heavily marketed are, in fact, heavily prescribed," Burt said.

"Modern medical science has made a huge amount of progress since 1985 -- particularly for chronic illnesses that older people suffer from," said Christine K. Cassel, chairman of geriatrics at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York. Since people are living longer, "you have consumers who are taking more medications because they have chronic conditions."

On the other hand, she added, direct-to-consumer advertising "has made a huge impact on sales of medications

Spending for prescription drugs is the fastest-growing category of health care expenditures. It is a major political issue for the Bush administration, which has proposed reducing drug costs for the elderly under the federal Medicare program, as well as a concern for employers and other consumers facing rising health costs.

The new information comes from a survey of a representative national sample of office-based physicians. It shows that medication (usually a prescription) was provided at 501 million of the more than 756 million visits to the doctor that Americans made during 1999.

The survey asked doctors how many drugs -- and which ones -- were prescribed or recommended during visits. In 1999, 146 drugs were prescribed per 100 visits, a 33 percent increase over the 1985 figure of 109 drugs per 100 visits.

Drugs to treat heart, circulatory and kidney diseases were the top category. But the most frequently prescribed drug, Claritin, is for allergy symptoms. Also among the top 10 were Lipitor, a cholesterol-lowering medicine; Prilosec, a drug for heartburn and for stomach and duodenal ulcers; and Celebrex, a new drug for arthritis.

The survey examined use of 104 drugs approved by the Food and Drug Administration between 1997 and 1999

and found evidence suggesting that marketing was closely related to frequency of prescribing.

Drugs that were heavily advertised were much more likely than others to be in the top 20 percent of new drugs prescribed. It found that four new drugs -- Celebrex and Vioxx for arthritis, Singulair for asthma and Detrol for overactive bladder -- accounted for 12 percent of the estimated \$17 billion increase in drug spending that occurred between 1998 and 1999.

"Manufacturers spend money on promotion to the extent that they believe that there's a good market," said Nancy M. Ostrove, deputy director of the FDA's division of drug marketing advertising and communication. She said it is impossible to say whether advertising causes prescribing or whether increases in both are driven by consumer demand.

"Does promotion lead to inappropriate prescribing?" she asked. "Trying to get at that is not easy."

The rise in prescribing "is good news because it's clear now that we have more medicines and better medicines for more diseases," said Jeff Trewhitt, a spokesman for the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America. He said 370 new drugs were marketed during the 1990s, compared with 233 in the 1980s.

Less expensive generic drugs make up a larger share of doctors' prescribing compared with costlier brand-name drugs than they did in the 1980s -- 47 percent in 2000, compared with 19 percent in 1984, Trewhitt said.

Burt said antibiotic prescribing declined by 14 percent in 1999 compared with 1985 -- potentially good news because overprescribing of antibiotics for infections that do not require them has been blamed as a factor in the rise of bacteria resistant to the drugs.

She said different categories of drugs were key contributors to the increase in prescription drugs for patients of different ages. For example, prescribing of Ritalin and other stimulants rose for children under 15; prescribing of anti-depressants increased for adolescents and young adults; and prescribing of cholesterol-lowering agents rose for middle-aged patients.

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